



# What Does My Baby Know About GRIEF?

“ **Anyone who is old enough to love is old enough to grieve.**  
- Alan Wolfelt, Director,  
Center for Loss & Life Transition ”

This can come as a surprise for many adults, but babies do grieve, particularly in response to the death of a primary caregiver (a mother or father).

A baby's grief looks very different from the grief of adults, or of older children, for a number of reasons:

- Babies don't have language yet, so they can't understand many of the words we say, and can't have death explained to them.
- They don't have the cognitive ability to understand complex concepts, so they can't grasp the idea of death or its permanence.
- Their memory functions aren't fully developed yet, so they can't hold on to memories of someone who died and feel

the hurt of missing them.

However, fields such as neuroscience and infant mental health have helped us paint a much more detailed picture about the lived experiences of babies, and have allowed us to understand the effects that an early loss has on these young lives.

## WHAT DO BABIES KNOW?

Imagine what it's like to live a baby's life. They are completely dependent on the love and support we provide them in order to thrive in this world. All of their needs are met by their big person:

- They need us to feed them when they're hungry.
- They need us to wash them when they're dirty.
- They need us to change them when they're soiled.
- When they can't calm themselves, they need us to sooth their bodies to help them regulate theirs.

Babies are born to attach to loving and

caring individuals in order to survive, and have many skills in being able to maintain and remember those connections, and to benefit from them.

They're made to gaze at us, and they recognize us before anyone else. The amount of time a caregiver spends with their baby is astounding. Out of that grows a strong familiarity with the feel of our touch, the aroma of our skin, the sound of our voice and the look of our face.

Babies are also born to jump right into routines. Caregivers come to know that there can be very specific times when our babies are ready to be fed, or when they need to be put down—and if that doesn't happen, our babies can let us know loud and clear!

## HOW DO BABIES EXPERIENCE LOSS?

Thinking about the lives of babies and the connection they have with their caregivers from the moment they're born, it shouldn't come as a surprise that if a mother or father or someone else very familiar to them dies (a sibling, perhaps), that loss is quite significant. As with people of any age, babies feel the loss of the relationship with their special person, and of the routines that were established with that person.

### ***LOSS OF THE PERSONAL TOUCH***

Think again about baby's experience of the important people in their life—and then the disruption of those connections:

- Mom is the best at rocking them for comfort when they're upset—and then



suddenly and unexpectedly she is gone.

- Dad is the only one who can sing the right song to put baby to bed—and then that lullaby is no longer heard.
- Big brother is the best at making the baby laugh and giggle—and then baby no longer has the experience of the silliness that their older sibling brings.

While babies may not have these memories in words or pictures like older children and adults do, their bodies remember very well their early sensory experiences of touch, smell, sound, taste and sight. Those are the memories that become lost and missed following the death of their special person.

So, while babies don't have the capacity to take in the idea that someone has died, or to understand the concept of death, they do understand change and absence very well.

### **LOSS OF THE FAMILY ROUTINE**

Beyond the loss of those comforting moments of connection, in the aftermath of a death many other changes occur in the family. Routines change significantly, and schedules that were once familiar and dependable for a baby shift dramatically and quickly:

- Feeding time may occur earlier or later to accommodate a changing work schedule.
- Time for play may no longer happen consistently because of having to pick up other siblings from school.
- Bedtime can be rushed and chaotic now in order to be able to get all of the housework done when there is limited downtime.

The routines and habits that a baby has been accustomed to have now changed abruptly and are no longer familiar—and they don't understand why.

A baby's grief lives within a realm of missing

someone and something they don't fully comprehend and can't remember in the same ways as older children or adults, but they do experience grief like we all do—just in their own ways.

## **WHAT DOES A BABY'S GRIEF LOOK LIKE?**

One of the most difficult parts of trying to understand a baby's grief is that they can't tell us directly what they're thinking and feeling, or even to give us big clues about what they're thinking and feeling like an older child is able to do. However, they do give us many signs that they may be grieving the loss of someone special to them.

Whenever a baby is cared for by a new adult caretaker, it takes time to begin understanding a baby's cues and responding to them in the most comforting ways. In other words, it takes time to figure out the best ways of "attuning" to a baby:

- Dad's touch may be rougher and harder than Mother's was.
- The way Mom rocks baby is just slightly different and less comfortable than Dad's was.
- The smell of Nana's skin is unfamiliar to a baby.

And there will be many other small (and not so small) differences as well.

In response to all these changes, the baby might like to tell us, *"Hey, wait a minute! This is different and I'm not used to it. I'm not sure if this is what I need to feel comfortable and I want what I'm used to back!"*

But since they can't tell us that in so many words, a grieving baby will communicate their feelings using the methods they have



available to them:

- They might react in much more distressful and protesting ways, like in not wanting to be picked up or held, or in pushing away from a new caregiver.
- They might be much more irritable and harder to console when they're upset.
- They might cry more—or maybe less—than they used to.
- They may appear to be searching for someone who's not there.
- Maybe they'll be less willing to go to people or respond to others than before.
- Perhaps they don't have as much emotional expression, or they seem anxious or clingy, or have a harder time with eating and sleeping.

While there may be some broad features common to the grief of babies, every baby's grief will be unique to them, just like for any other person. Some babies may show no signs of distress, others show a few signs, and some babies show many.

In addition, as with children of many ages, these experiences may come in “grief bursts”—little spurts for a moment or two, which then disappear from view for a while until they surface again. Children react like this because they simply can't sustain the intensity of the grief feelings for too long. We need to keep this in mind so that we don't assume that a baby (or young child) is not grieving at all, just because we don't see what we assume grief “should” look like.

## SUPPORTING A GRIEVING BABY

All by itself, time will not necessarily “heal all wounds.” But the time after the death of an important person in a baby's life can be used to build new connections with new caregivers (or with existing caregivers

playing new roles in the baby's life).

Over time, both baby and the caregiver(s) can spend that time adjusting to these new changes and relationships. Within that time, a baby can learn that their new caregiver will keep them safe, and will love and nurture them.

In turn, over time an adult can also learn to be better at responding to a baby's cues—to learn which cry means hungry and which cry means wet, to come to know the look on their face when baby is getting tired, and understand how tightly to hold them when they need comfort.



Babies might not be able to explain grief in words. But that doesn't mean that they don't feel grief. It doesn't mean that they don't feel loss and disruption. Along with being able to feel grief and loss, our tiny ones are also able to feel love and comfort

and support. At times of difficulty and distress, just like the rest of us, that's what our babies need the most.

Babies are able to take that in. Because—anyone old enough to grieve is also old enough feel loved.

**NOTE:** *We have heard from many adults who are grieving that they feel like they're just not able to provide their children everything they need during this difficult time. That is normal, and is understandable. Grief takes a lot of energy, and there's only so much to go around. Remember that babies are resilient, and they won't be "broken" by this experience. We do what we can, one day at a time,*

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## GRIEVING BABY, GRIEVING CAREGIVER:

*Helpful Practices to Support Caregivers in Their Own Losses*

Many of the behaviors of babies in distress can be concerning, especially for a new caregiver.

For an adult who may themselves also be grieving the loss of someone significant in their own lives, it can be incredibly difficult to focus on the needs of a baby or to try to understand what they need most.

As hard as it may be in the days, weeks and months following a death, our attempts to be consistent and to follow a routine will be very helpful—this will allow a baby to begin to learn that they can count on us for being cared for and will strengthen their relationship with us.

Knowing how much our children depend on us for safety, security and comfort, it's understandable for us to think that if we just

focus on getting our children through this difficult time, we can get back to taking care of ourselves later, when we have some extra time available.

Unfortunately, if we are grieving ourselves, we will not be fully available to provide this safety, security and comfort to our children. That doesn't mean we have to wait until we're completely healed ourselves in order to help our children. It does mean, however, that attending to ourselves and our own needs at the same time we're attending to the needs of our children is the best way to help them and the family as a whole as we move together on into the future.



It's important to keep in mind, then, that caring for ourselves is a very important way of caring for a baby. So, ways of helping our babies in their grief include helping

ourselves in our own grief:

- Find a caring support network of friends and relatives.
- Engage in a peer support group with other adults who have experienced a death.
- Get assistance from a provider or therapist.
- Practice self-care.
- Make sure basic needs (food, shelter, sleep) are being met.

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## WHAT ABOUT WHEN A BABY GETS OLDER?

### *Helpful Practices to Support Grieving Children Over Time*

As children grow and mature, their grief grows and matures with them. At each developmental stage, as new and different experiences help them to see and understand the world in new and different ways, they meet with new difficulties and discover new abilities. What happens when grieving babies get older and they can ask us questions—when they comprehend death further and want to know more about their person?

As babies grow and mature, here are some thoughts and ideas about how to help them with their loss and their feelings over time:

- Collect photos, mementos, letters, cards and other items of the person who died and keep them in a memory box.
- If there is a situation where the person who is dying has a chance to record a video or a voice recording, or to write a letter, include those also.
- This allows us to keep items of our special person that can be shared when a baby gets older as one way to help them get to know who their person was. While

these will not be direct memories of that person in the same ways we have those memories, they will still be memories that they build which they can share in as a part of the family of that person.

- As hard as it may be, we don't need to shy away from talking about our special person throughout our baby's life. We and our baby can look at photos together as we tell them, for example, "This is your daddy." This will also help them have a connection with that special person in a different way.

- When they become old enough to ask questions, we can answer them as honestly and as directly as possible while being developmentally appropriate. Our child might ask "Why does Sally have a mommy and I don't?" We could answer something like this: "Your mommy died when you were a baby. Died is when the body stops working and that person can't come back. Some families have a person who died before they can really remember but that doesn't mean you didn't have a mommy. Your mommy loved you very much. Let me show you some things of your mommy."

- We can allow our growing child to have a connection to our special person by developing bonds with them through things like:
  - Sharing memories and telling stories;
  - Maintaining traditions such as celebrating their birthday;
  - Releasing a balloon on the day of their death;
  - Visiting the gravesite;
  - And (depending on our spiritual beliefs) continuing to talk to that person or sharing a prayer with them.